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Pentecost • Numbers 11:24–30 • June 8, 2014

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Gift giving frequently accompanies celebrations. The birth of a child, the joining of man in woman in marriage, confirmation, graduation, and the like are all occasions for giving and receiving gifts. Some gifts are received with great joy and gratitude. Some gifts have caused recipients to express gratitude while simultaneously thinking of how that gift might be re-gifted or returned because the gift is a duplicate or not what was really wanted.

The Israelites, as we see earlier in Numbers 11, were dissatisfied. Actually, they were more than dissatisfied. Their grumbling and complaining and anger with God was at a level that would have seemed more appropriate had a pandemic struck their community or had the Egyptians returned and killed most of them. Those gifted with freedom from slavery, with God’s visible presence with them on their journey to the Promised Land in the fire by night and cloud by day, and with manna fresh every morning, were not one bit pleased. They were ungrateful. What did they lack? Nothing. What did they want? Meat, fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic. Granted, any simple meal would be more appealing if it was accompanied by juices from roasted meats and seasoned with savory vegetables. Ungrateful hearts see not what they need and have but what they want and lack.

How did Moses, their leader, deal with their ungratefulness? The anger of the Lord was ablaze and Moses was “displeased.” It can be frustrating when a pastor cannot please the people because what the pastor has to give the people do not want, and what the people want the pastor does not have to give. We are tempted to side with Moses and add our displeasure to what pours out from the heart of God’s servant. Moses is charged with leading these people and yet the people do not respond to him, and we naturally wonder, and even demand to know, what God is going to do about it.

How very telling that God continues to be “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love”! Boldly, we echo the words of the psalmist saying, “These all look to you, to give them their food in due season” (Ps 104:27). God did not withhold his hand of blessing to the people of Israel, and he continues to stretch forth his hand, to give us our daily bread, and to give us the gift of his Spirit.

In our text, a cloud descends on Moses and the seventy men of the elders. Instead of a crack of thunder, a bolt of lightning, and torrential rains to sweep them away, the Lord comes down in the cloud and gives them a gift. The same gift of the Spirit given to Moses is now shared with the seventy. Moses loses none of his gift, but as one candle lights another, the Spirit is given to each and they all begin to prophesy. This is God’s gift to his people to be a blessing to others.

New gifts! The presence of the Lord! More blessings! A time for repentance and renewed zeal for ministry? Not quite. The Lord chose to also give this gift to Eldad and Medad who had not shown up for the meeting that day. This caused Joshua much angst because, well, why should they have a special and powerful gift when they do not appear to be, by human measurement, worthy of such gifts. Joshua saw himself as being more worthy than they. Joshua, Moses’s servant since his youth, was displeased that God would give this gift to those with fewer years of experience.

On this day of Pentecost, we pray in the Collect, “O God, on this day, You once taught the hearts of Your faithful people by sending them the light of Your Holy Spirit. Grant us in our day by the same Spirit to have a right understanding in all things and evermore to rejoice in His holy consolation.” Today we celebrate God’s faithfulness to the Israelites, to Moses, to his church throughout the ages. We rejoice that God continues to gift his church with all things needful. We repent for being ungrateful when God’s hand stretches forth and provides abundantly all that we need for body and spirit. We repent for the times we look at other baptized brothers and sisters and become jealous of how God has blessed them. Today, on a day of great celebration, and renewed by the Spirit, we pray God will use each of us to tell of his marvelous blessings.

William Wrede